



It's one of those hot, sunny Carnival days on the island of Aruba. The street is brimming with revelers waiting for the parade to begin. Slowly, the pedestrian traffic begins to creep off to the sides of the road and into homemade Carnival bleachers and booths. In the distance there is a rumbling—a faint beat hitching a ride with the trade winds weaving through the crowded streets. A snare drum builds into a crescendo like a train steaming down the tracks, slowly but surely gaining momentum. Muffled wails and moans interrupt the steady stream of sound.

From afar, it doesn't sound much like music, the rhythm not yet taking recognizable form. Yet the closer it gets, the more hypnotic it becomes. The bass drum is now banging; cowbells and disc brakes are clanging. Then, Blam! Horns blare in unison, bottomed-out by the choppy murkiness of trombones. The crowd seems to experience spontaneous recognition as the chorus to one of the top Carnival songs can now be discerned. Everyone is unified in their excitement as the bleachers shift and sway under the movement of dancing bodies. And then in the same manner that it arrived, it fades away. As that last line of horns passes, it just doesn't sound like music anymore.

The brass band is not a new musical concept. The fife and drum, drum and bugle, marching band—they're all one in the same, give or take an instrument or a few. It's all about music and motion, or, more accurately, like music in motion.

These marching musical movements have been a part of the island's culture in one form or another for many years. When ties with Holland ran much deeper, most official cere-



Strike up the Band

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monies started and ended with a parade and The Royal Dutch Marine Brass Band accompanied, on occasion, by a local band. However, the primary function for local bands was funerary duties. Most funeral processions were either led or followed by a smaller version of a brass band, playing dirges for the departed.

But, what eventually became most important to the band members was participation in Carnival. The music allowed the bands to break away from the rigid pomp-and-circumstance and solemn hymns. The brass band movement became free flowing, with the versatility of the instruments allowing for the development of Latin, Calypso, Caribbean, and American pop tunes as repertoires. This versatility aided in the crippling of the once dominant, yet less adaptable, steel pan music—a sound that was already on the decline on the Carnival scene.

What started as a couple of bands debuting on the streets of Carnival splintered into more bands exhibiting a complexity of styles



This vintage 45 was produced by the Drumband of the Marine Barracks in Savaneta. Marching musical movements have been a part of Aruba's culture in one form or another for many years.

and sounds. Although the number of members (instrumentation) was rigid—usually limited to between twenty-eight and thirty players—the repertoire was unusually flexible. Programs could consist of anything from original works, orchestral transcriptions, and featured soloists to novelty items, marches, medleys, and hymn tune arrangements.

Obviously, what makes the brass band unique are the brass instruments which, with the exception of the bass trombone, are scored in treble clef. This scoring characteristic has allowed for remarkable freedom among certain bands, making the transition from one instrument to another somewhat easier. Many of the players can't read music but play by simply learning the parts by rote.

The most dynamic sound to grow from this style of scoring is called 'Asambeho' (an amalgamation of Arnold Beyde and Sam Hodge—two members of one of the original brass bands). Like the expression, 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing,' Asambeho wasn't exactly that mellow Caribbean rhythm





islanders were used to hearing; this was a rocking good time created by an infectious rhythm. Part of the horn section played a tune with a few trumpets cresting to their highest notes to give the music flavor. The sound was also syncopated, giving a space for the percussion to really breathe. The high-pitched clanging on an automobile disc brake usually held the beat and band together.

During the height of brass fever during the early 80's, there were as many as twenty-five bands on the island competing for top brass during Carnival. The most-renown band of that era was the Hell's Angels. Already sporting the top horn section, the Angels were credited with introducing the tympanis, or "quad drums," to the percussion section. They were truly an original act, adding a dance routine and donning creative, bordering on outrageous, costumes. Many felt they simply blew the competition away.

However as the decade would come to a close, so would the brass band's heyday. Carnival music took on a whole new sound in the 90's. As with American Jazz and its big bands of the 40's and 50's, and rock-n-roll and its super groups of the 70's and 80's, big speakers and a tiny microchip easily eliminated most of the musical cast. New keyboards and MIDI samplers were generating a host of contemporary and interesting sounds. The result was a surge of smaller bands squeezing out their larger predecessors.

The brass band and the Asambeho sound were forced to reinvent to keep up with the changes. Many of the horn players became sidemen for the host of new groups that sprang up during the decade. The rhythms became tighter, faster, and a lot less syncopated, though the brass still wove magic within the songs, and, when necessary, hit those high notes to accentuate the music.

Although the brass band doesn't dominate the musical landscape of Aruba as it once did, it hasn't played its swan song either. Asambeho is the sound of Carnival for many islanders, and the brass section remains the heart of every band. 

